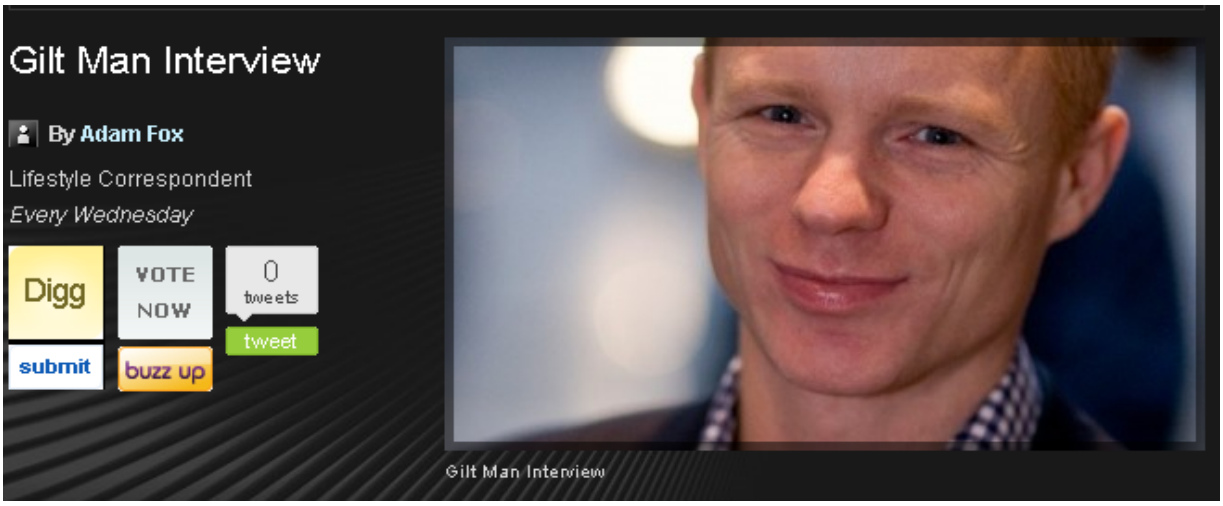


Bargain shopping used to mean digging through piles of five-season-old styles, triple extra larges and allegedly unnoticeable irregulars only to save a meager 40%. Its online equivalent doesn't fair much better: When was the last time you purchased anything from Overstock.com? But those discount days are long gone and not in the annoyingly misleading way that commercials from T.J.Maxx, Marshalls and Burlington Coat Factory claim. Like the gilded name implies, the barely two-year-old Gilt Groupe is giving online shopping the luster it never had.

The relative newcomer to the off-price fashion scene is one part outlet, one part eBay and 100% luxury. Products ranging from everyday Tumi luggage to esoteric Matuse wetsuits are offered daily during Gilt's time-limited sales at up to 80% off retail prices. Each auction begins at noon during the workweek and typically lasts just a few days, which creates a sense of urgency. But in Gilt's glittery, golden world, it all comes without the hassle of haggling over potentially counterfeit/damaged/ugly Louis Vuitton from a sketchy seller in Iowa.

At the control buttons of the recently launched men's-only website, cleverly titled Gilt Man, is internet guru Nate Richardson. Today he's an open book as our personal guide to online shopping and Gilt.

About Gilt Groupe

Gilt Groupe is like an exclusive club. Can you explain how the membership-only model works?

Gilt's heritage begins with two women, Alexis and Alexandra, who started the company two years ago. They wanted merchandise that their friends could go buy in a sample sale online that didn't require them to line up outside of some clandestine building. As merchandise was added to the site, they realized that more people went to the site. So, we opened up the opportunity for people to invite their friends. It's a great viral effect of people who are tastemakers and people who are discerning about how they look. They have an interest in brands, and they become members. People who don't have an interest in those things will probably deselect themselves from even window-shopping at our site.

AskMen.com, November 25, 2009

Why not have it open to everybody? It's sort of a gimmick, right?
No, it's definitely not a gimmick. In the past, we have closed off new membership for a couple of different reasons. Sometimes we feel like the members we have are not able to get to the merchandise at the same pace or with the same frequency as they may have in the past. As we have grown the business and added inventory, we were able to open up to more members. As our business evolves, we have more sizes and selections that allow us to have a broader membership. But we certainly don't have the inventory to manage 100 million people at this point.

Gilt has become a sort of phenomenon among people who live in New York City. What do you think has contributed to its success in the Big Apple?
In New York City, I think the success is largely driven by word-of-mouth and people being incredibly pressed for time. Men in New York are working hard, they're playing hard and they want instant gratification. When you go onto GiltMan.com, you get a bit of instant gratification because you have it showing up at your house the next day. But I don't think its just New York guys. The reality is that we do incredibly well in most major urban areas.

Online shopping

There are a ton of online retailers out there each with their own flavor. What do you think guys should look for when they shop online?
They should definitely look at Gilt Man! The quality of the brands is probably the biggest thing as well as a point-of-view around how to style. I think that men who want to look great, care about how they dress and want to make a statement should look at places that are giving them those cues. If a men's jacket is on a table or a white wall, then they are just looking to get rid of it. But if they are putting it on a model and styling it to make you understand how to wear it, that's value added. If it's on a table, you're not sure how it's going to fit. You can end up having a men's suit that hangs off you looking like you just lost 100 pounds when you really should have bought something three sizes smaller.

That's a good point. Fit is a huge problem, so how should men assess fit when they are shopping online?
We actually have a number of tools on the site both in the blog area and in the product pages to help men ensure a proper fit. We have conversion charts for European and U.S. sizes, and we also have fit guides. Generally, men will get their size pretty accurately. It's also OK to get something tailored -- get your pants hemmed or your jacket taken in. Spend the money and you'll look that much better whether you buy it in a store or on our site. Tailored clothes are one of those things that we give you permission to go do because it will add more definition to how things hang on your body.

Do you think some things are more difficult to purchase online when you consider fit?
Not particularly. We have noticed that sneakers move really quickly. There seems to be an enormous amount of demand for sneakers from Gen Y guys, which is really exciting for us. And in terms of suiting and shirts, the men that we have on our site generally know their sizes. They seem to be speaking to us pretty loudly with the sale volume and limited number of returns we get.

What is the best way for guys to avoid online buyer's remorse?
Look in the back of your collar and find out your size. Ask someone around you: Do you think it looks good on me? Do you think I should go a size smaller or larger? I talk to a lot of my friends who have no idea what their sizes are. Every time they go to the store, they have to ask for it again. So, literally pull your collar back, have the hot girl at the desk next to you look at your neck size and then go buy.

Do you think online return policies are becoming stricter in these tough times?
I actually think that the policies are pretty generous. Our return policy is that you can return things within 21 days of receipt by going to our site and clicking a button. And we pay for return shipping. That's pretty hands free. Keep the box for a week and try on the clothes. Then, print the label and send it back to us if its not working for you. But generally, it will.

Men’s fashion

So Gilt Man is geared toward helping men dress better. What’s your take on the current status of men in America?
Dressing better is probably not the right way of saying it as much as dressing with confidence and style in a way that helps really distinguish themselves. I think that American men are definitely confident. They should feel even more confident about their clothing and have the permission to buy brands that are really going to show off just how confident they are. Guys are confident in how they look and we give them that one extra step to go do it. The clothes I'm wearing are all part of that package.

What are the biggest trends that you’re seeing in menswear right now?
We do pick up on a lot of the fashion trends, but we have been trying to avoid being trend-oriented and instead more style-oriented. We looked at different archetypes that we wanted to build and buy products for. We think these are the men that guys want to emulate. We’ll continue to have items that may be more trend oriented, but really we’re trying to help guys have a confident, discerning sense of style.

Give us three must-haves for winter.
I knew this was coming. I do believe guys should have a pair of gloves, and I think those gloves should be appropriate for what they’re doing. They should either have gloves that are leather for the office or if they are riding their bike to the office, maybe get a pair of cut-off gloves. If they are skiers, they should definitely check out our site for gloves that are appropriate for ski activity.

The second thing is a scarf. The scarf theme has been huge. There are people that were wearing scarves as accent pieces throughout the year, but now is the time to use those scarves appropriately when the weather gets chillier.

Finally, you should layer for the winter. A lot of people don’t get that its OK to put a fleece jacket under a tailored blazer or a hoodie under a coat, but all of it looks great together. It you take a hoodie and pair it with your blazer, you’re going to look 10 years younger. If you take a puffer jacket and put it under the blazer, heads are going to turn and say that guy has confidence.

"We have noticed that 50% of consumers we have come from men on their iPhones...“

About Gilt Man

Gilt Man recently spun off into its own website. Do you think there is something unique about the male consumer that warranted that?
Definitely. Guys are underserved and much more tech-oriented. We have noticed that 50% of consumers we have come from men on their iPhones, which is disproportionate to the rest of the site. They are discerning, yet they are discreet. Guys don’t want to show off by walking into a luxury retailer. We give them discretion to do things at their desk when they're busy. They can buy into the brands that they know make them look great without having to walk down the street with a bag that screams “Look at me! I buy luxury!”

For the last year or so there has been a surge in the number of off-price retailers online. What do you think sets Gilt Man apart?
We were the first to launch a men's-only site. We designed it with a bunch of guys and used them as our test for it. We wanted a site for guys where they have an environment that’s just for them. It's really the ultimate store for men -- not just a women's site morphed into a men's site. It’s not walking through a fragrance counter that is pink and purple. It’s walking into a site that’s going to have something for workwear, playwear and streetwear. Men can purchase with confidence and feel great knowing that they’re going to be the guy that everyone is turning to look at in a bar or social setting.

The other thing is that we invest in styling clothes. Even with the sports equipment, we are conscious about putting it through our styling. We work with the models here in New York and style it at our studios in Brooklyn. So, that’s another point of differentiation.

What other features will Gilt Man add over the next six months?
I think that's the exciting part that keeps you coming back to Gilt Man. We are going to continue to add not just fashion brands, but also sports, sports equipment and gadgets. I think that the number of things a guy does in his life is pretty broad, so you can expect to see us hit on a number of those categories. We are also looking at collaborations around sneakers, hoodies and T-shirts with artists for charity. We are always looking to do things that will help guys distinguish themselves in how they dress.

About Nate Richardson

You came from the financial world. What makes you an authority?
One of my last big jobs in the internet was Yahoo! Finance, and their consumer is a guy who spends a lot of money on looking good and feeling great about what he has. Understanding that psyche is very similar to the psyche that we're understanding here at Gilt Man.

What's the best item you've purchased on Gilt?
A folding bike from Strida. It's really lightweight and I can fold it in the six floors it takes me to get up to my place.

What's the worst?
I have a pair of pants that I get comments on because I look great in them. They are very fashion-forward, but they have some seeming and bolting on them that make them more structured. I ride my bike to the office, and one day I was having trouble kicking it into high gear. They are beautiful fashion pants, but they aren't what I would call performance pants. It was my bad for not realizing that I was looking great but wasn't catering to my need to bike back and forth to the office.

When you're not glued to Gilt, where else to you shop?
I am the Gilt guy in the sense that I do not like going to stores, and I am an early adopter of the internet. My wardrobe was getting a little stale before Gilt. It's sort of a pleasure to have an updated wardrobe.

But not everything you're wearing today is from Gilt.
Are you picking up on the fact that my boots aren't shined? It's fair to say that I have four pieces of Gilt on.

So where are the boots from?
They are from one of our brands, but I bought them back when I was at Yahoo! and cash was a lot more flush.

If you're into online shopping, check out our article on buying clothes online or a recent interview with John Varvatos, where he talks about his new web site.